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中島敦の『名人伝』

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中島敦（1909-1942）は、1909年（明治四十二年）に東京に生まれた。中島家は江戸時代より続く儒家の家柄で、彼も一高・東大国文科を出て、横浜高女の教師となった。喘息の発作に悩まされながらも創作活動も行った。1941年（昭和十六年）にはパラオ南洋庁の国語編修書記となり、パラオに赴任する。転地療養のつもりであったが、病状はかえって悪化した。1942年（昭和十七年）、「光と風と夢」が芥川賞候補となる。同年12月4日に喘息のため死去。

『名人伝』は中島が死去した昭和12年に『文庫』12月号に発表されたものである。『烈子』に基づく物語である。趙の邯鄲の都に住む紀昌という男が、天下第一の弓の名人になろうとして、ついに「不射之射」の極致に到達する話である。

In the capital of Kantan in the Land of Cho there lived a Man whose name was Kisho, whose deepest wish was to become the greatest archer in the world. In pursuit of this aim, having searched out all manner of teachers, he could settle on no other than Hiei, the most renowned master of archery at the time. It was said of Hiei that out of a hundred shots at a hundred paces, he could hit a willow-leaf target a hundred times. And so it was that Kisho left a distant Kantan and made his way to Hiei, to commend himself as pupil to the great Master.

Hiei ordered his new pupil first to learn how not to blink his eyes. With that, Kisho went home, crawled under his wife's weaving loom, lay down on his back, and stared upward. He determined to fix his eyes unblinkingly at the pointed wooden shaft moving swiftly up and down almost close enough to prick his eye. His wife had no idea what he was up to and was quite upset. First of all, she was disconcerted that her husband should place himself in that outlandish position, peering up from such a peculiar angle. When she grew irritated by all this, Kisho scolded her roundly and got her reluctantly to go on weaving. Day after day, in the same singular manner, he went on training himself not to blink. Two years passed, and the pointed peg moving rapidly up and down beneath the loom could meet his eye-lashes without producing a wink. At last he crawled out from under the loom. Even if the sharp point of a drill were to poke his eye, he would not blink; even if sudden sparks were to fly in his eyes or whirling ash to blow over him, he never flinched. He had utterly forgotten how to work the muscles of his eyelids, so that even in a deep slumber they remained wide open. It was not until a tiny spider spun its web across his eye-lashes, that he finally mustered the self-confidence to tell his teacher Hiei.

On hearing this, Hiei retorted, "Merely keeping your eyes open does not amount to true archery.

Next you must learn to see. When you have achieved that—which means to see blurred and indistinct objects enlarged and unequivocally clear—then come back and tell me about it.”

Kisho went home again, caught up a louse lodged in the seam of his undershirt, and bound it fast to a single hair of his head which he hung from the top of a South window. He gazed at it all that day, and continued day after day gazing at the louse strung up in the window. At first, of course, it was no more than a louse, and after two or three more days it was, naturally, still a louse. But after ten days—though it may have been only fancy—it seemed to have become a trifle bigger. Anyway, after three months it appeared to him—he had no doubt—as big as a silkworm. The scene outside the window from which the louse dangled also changed gradually with the seasons. The laughing sunshine of spring changed to stinging summer heat, then wild geese flew high across the clear autumn sky, soon followed by frosty cold and grey sleet falling from above. Kisho still patiently watched the tiny crawling specimen of the insect family Arthropod as it hung from a hair. He replaced the first louse more than ten times over, and so three years flew by. Then suddenly one day, the louse on the window appeared as large as a horse. “I’ve done it!” he shouted, pounding his knee, and burst from the house. He could hardly believe his eyes. People looked as tall as pagodas, horses like mountains, pigs like hills, and hens like watch-towers. Jumping for joy, he went into the house again and stationed himself in front of the window. With his strong, hartshorn-trimmed bow tightly strung, he drove a sharp arrow right through the middle of the louse’s heart, without so much as touching the hair from which it was suspended.

Kisho took himself forthwith to report to his teacher. Hiei fairly danced with pleasure, slapped him on the chest, and lauded him with “You did it!” Immediately he began to initiate Kisho into all the secrets of the art of bowmanship.

Since Kisho had already spent five whole years on nothing but eye training, his progress was now amazingly rapid.

Only ten days after he had begun his initiation into the art of the bow, Kisho attempted to hit a willow leaf at 100 paces and managed with 100 shots to hit the mark every time. Twenty days later he stood a sake cup of water on his right elbow, drew his stout bow tight and shot. The arrow met its mark without the slightest stir of the water. After a month, when he attempted to shoot a hundred arrows at high speed, the first hit the mark, the next thrust itself precisely into the exact notch of the first arrow, and the point of the third arrow whipped, not a hair's breadth to the left or right, smack! into the notch of the second one. Shaft upon shaft, shot upon shot, stuck squarely in the groove of the preceding arrow, and not a single one fell to the earth. In no time, a hundred arrows formed one straight line, shaft to shaft, as though bound together, until the last notch of the last arrow could have been poised on the bowstring itself. The Master Hiei, who had been watching from nearby, murmured a spontaneous “Magnificent!”

On returning home two months later, Kisho got into a quarrel with his wife. In order to frighten her, he laid an excellent arrow on his fine bowstring, pulled it taut and let the shaft fly past her eyes. The arrow neatly sliced away three of her eyelashes and flew into the distance, but she herself noticed nothing, and without so much as a wink went right on berating her husband. To this degree, owing to his skill, his speed, and his precision had his aim excelled.

One day, now that he had nothing left to learn from his Master, a less than noble thought suddenly floated into his head.

After lengthy brooding over the matter, he came to the conclusion that out of Hiei he could gain nothing more of worth for his prowess in archery. Furthermore, to become the greatest archer on earth, he would somehow have to get Hiei out of the way. Mulling over this possibility one day, he happened to meet Hiei all alone on a plain. Kisho snatched an arrow and drew. In the same instant, Hiei sensed the meaning of his expression and answered the shot with his own arrow. Each time they shot, their two arrows met exactly at midpoint and wafted together to the ground, stirring up not a puff of dust. The superb mastery of the two was an unearthly wonder. At last Hiei had used up all his arrows, while Kisho still had one left. Self-assured, he let it fly. In that fraction of a second, Hiei broke off the branch of a briar bush, and with one sharp thorn deflected Kisho's missile to the ground. Kisho now realized that he had not attained the goal of his unbounded ambition and felt a sudden shame. Had he attained his end, he would not have been brought so morally low as he now was. Hiei was relieved to have escaped the danger, and so pleased with his own part, that he let his opponent's hatred be forgotten. Master and disciple ran toward each other and embraced in the middle of the meadow, where stirred by noble love, they wept. (This cannot be comprehended in the moral light of today. One time the gourmet Kanko of Sai yearned for some novel delicacy not yet savored, and his chef Ekiga took his own son and served him to his master, flesh and bone, in a broth. And there was yet another time when a 16-year-old youth, who was to become the first Emperor of the Tsin Dynasty, on the very night of his father's death thrice took for himself the beloved concubine of the deceased. It is of such times as these that we tell.)

While they shed tears in each other's arms, Hiei was thinking that it would be extremely perilous if his pupil were again to consider such a move, which meant he would certainly have to give him a new goal, to forestall any bad outcome. He addressed his dangerous disciple: "I have shared with you all that was worth sharing. If you want to go further into this art, you will have to take yourself westward to the steep Taigyo mountain range and climb the peak of Kwaku. There dwells Old Kanyoh, the greatest archer of all time. To him our bowmanship is mere child's play. There is no other teacher fit for you than Kanyoh."

Kisho set out without delay on his journey to the West. That his teacher had said that their art up to this point was child's play to this old master had wounded his pride. If that were really true, he would still have a long way to go in order to become the greatest Bowman in the world. Was the actual state of his art really child's play? In that case, he would indeed have to meet this man as soon as possible and challenge him, and with that he hastened all the more on his way. He tore open the soles of his feet and strained his legs, but nevertheless scrambled up the perilous peaks and traversed the steep mountain paths until after a month, he finally came to the summit, his destination.

Whereupon the zealous Kisho was approached by a frail and hoary old man with eyes as soft and gentle as a lamb's. He could have been well over a hundred years old. So bent was he with age that his white beard brushed the ground as he walked.

Kisho thought the old man was deaf and announced his purpose in a loud voice. Explaining that he wished to demonstrate his art, in his haste he could not wait for the old man to reply, but took his powerful

bow from his shoulder and laid on an arrow with a sharp tip of stone. Just then a flock of migrating birds came flying high in the heavens, and at these he took aim. He flexed the bowstring and took out, in one shot, five large birds from the clear blue sky above.

"You shoot very well," said the old man with an amiable smile. "Of course, that was a shot with bow and arrow, but you do not yet know how to shoot without a bow and arrow."

Kisho was incensed at these words. He was then led by the old hermit to a steep cliff some two hundred paces away. At their feet was a sharp precipice with straight walls almost like a folding screen, and far below one could discern a mountain stream as fine as a thread. Only a quick glance down that deep abyss would bring on a sharp vertigo. From this wall the Old Man stepped right out onto a crag that hung halfway in the air. He twisted himself around and said to Kisho: "Well, how about it? Can you repeat your little show of art from here?" There was no turning back. As Kisho tread on the rock where the old man had stood, he wavered slightly in his resolve. After he had stirred up his courage again and was about to position his arrow, a small stone from the edge of the cliff fell away. Kisho's eyes followed it and instinctively, he threw himself to the ground. His legs trembled and he broke into a sweat down to his very heels. The old man laughingly reached out a hand and helped him from the overhanging rock shelf; then he mounted the rock himself and said, "Shall I drive a shot for you?" Kisho, still pale and trembling, noticed that he had no bow and said, "But what about the bow? The bow...?" The old man stood with his pale hands empty. "A bow?" said he smiling. "If you need a bow, that's simply shooting with bow and arrow. With sufficient schooling of the spirit, you need no lacquered bow, no well-crafted arrow."

Directly overhead, high in the air, a hawk was drawing a great sweeping circle. It looked as small as a sesame seed and for a short while Kanyoh looked up, contemplating it. Then he fitted an invisible arrow to his formless bow, flexed it to the span of a full moon and shot. Behold, without a flutter of a wing, the hawk dropped like a stone from the heights.

Kisho shivered. For the first time he saw and was struck by the unfathomable beauty and depths of Art sublime.

Nine years long Kisho remained at the side of this aged Master, though none could say what training he underwent.

When, after those nine years, Kisho returned from the mountains, the people were astonished at his aspect. His former unyielding and fearless mien had vanished and his face seemed as blank and empty as a figure carved from wood—or a simpleton. After some time, Kisho visited his old teacher Hiei, who with one glance at the former's face, called out in wonderment. "Here indeed is the greatest Master on Earth; people such as we are not worthy to stand before him!"

The city of Kantan welcomed Kisho, who had now become the Greatest Master in the World. The people glowed in anticipation of Kisho's now performing before all eyes his supreme skill.

However, Kisho did not offer the least promise toward their expectations. No, not even once did he take up a bow. That stout bow which he had carried with him to the mountains, he must have cast away somewhere. When someone asked him about it, he gave only a languorous reply.

“Action for the sake of action amounts to nothing; wise speech needs no words; and the best archer needs no bow.”

“That makes sense,” said the good people of Kantan who were able to understand. They were proud of their bowmaster who needed no bow. The glory of his invincibility covered all, however long he did not touch a bow.

There were various reports that spread among the people. Every midnight someone would hear the sound of arrows pattering against the roof of Kisho's house. They said that while Kisho slept, the god of archers who lived inside such Masters, would slip out of his body, undertake a nightwatch and drive away the ghosts. A merchant who lived in the neighborhood testified that one night he had seen Kisho atop a cloud floating over the great master's house, unprecedented bow in hand, in contest with two Masters of ancient times, Gei and Yohyuki. There, each arrow shot by the three Masters, in a beam of soft light had vanished into the night sky between Orion and Sirius. Even a thief swore that just as he had made to slip into Kisho's house, about to climb the wall, he was hit in the forehead with a sharp, formless arrow shot from the building, and had fallen back the moment he had felt it. After that, men with evil intent would make a good kilometer's detour of the place, and the more clever birds flew no more across that roof.

In the height of fame, the Master Kisho grew gradually old. Long before, he had loosed his soul from the grip of perfected bowmanship and seemed to have attained the utmost peace of spirit. His face of a wooden figure had lost all expression, his speech was seldom heard, and one would doubt even whether he still breathed. In the last year of his life, the old Master was heard to say, “I do not remember the difference between the I and the Other; I no longer know the what of Yes and of No. To me, the eyes are the ears, the ears the nose, and the nose the mouth. It is all one and the same.”

Forty years after he had taken leave of his old teacher Kanyoh, Kisho quietly passed from this world, as quietly as smoke. During those forty years he had certainly never more spoken of archery, and if he never even uttered the word, it was unthinkable that he might ever again have put a hand to bow or arrow. Of course, as storyteller, I would like to bring the old Master through some spectacular deeds before the end, telling why he was truly the greatest Archer in the world. But somehow, we dare not distort or embellish the facts described in the writings of old. His very inaction in his old age served, in fact, to act a great lesson on others, precisely because he did no act. And so it seems that only curious tales such as this are handed down to us.

There remains one incident that was said to have happened a year or two before his death. It seems that one day old Kisho was invited to the home of an acquaintance, where his eye fell upon an implement there. He surely should have recognized it, but he simply could not remember what it was called or what it was used for. The ancient asked his host, “What kind of apparatus is that and what is it for?” The host, thinking his guest was jesting, gave an embarrassed laugh. Old Kisho, all in earnest, asked a second time. But the man kept smiling, since he could not decipher his guest's inscrutable expression. When Kisho asked the same question intently a third time, the host blanched in something like horror. He looked hard into the old man's eyes. This person was not joking, nor was he mad, and the host had certainly not erred. He was overcome with awe and cried out, stumbling over the words, “Oh, the Master! Has the greatest bowmaster of all time utterly forgotten the bow and arrow? Not even what they are called nor what they are used for!”

Thereafter, for a long time in the capital city of Kantan, painters hid their brushes, musicians tore the strings from their instruments, and craftsmen were ashamed to take up compass and rule.

Atsushi Nakajima's Chronological Table and His Major Works

1909 (Meiji 42)

Born in Yotsuya, Tokyo. Father, Tabito, teacher of Chinese classics; mother, Chiyo primary school teacher. Grandfather also a teacher of Chinese classics. Education in Chinese classics acquired at home.

1916 (Taisho 5)

Entered primary school, Nara Prefecture. Later attended schools in Shizuoka and in Seoul.

1922 (Taisho 11)

Attended secondary school in Seoul.

1926 (Taisho 15)

Entered Dai-ichi High School, Tokyo.

1930 (Showa 5)

Entered Japanese Literature Department, Tokyo Imperial University.

1931 (Showa 6)

Married Taka Hashimoto.

1933 (Showa 8)

Graduated University. Taught at Yokohama Womens' High School; entered Tokyo Imperial University Graduate School specializing in Ogai Mori.

1934 (Showa 9)

Left graduate for poor health. Novel, *Toragari (Tiger-hunting)* gained honorable mention in Chuo Koron contest. Suffered serious asthma. Travelled to Ogasawara Islands.

1941 (Showa 16)

Leave of absence from Yokohama Womens' High School; took post as textbook compiler, Southseas Agency in Palalu Islands.

1942 (Showa 17)

Returned to Tokyo; devoted self to writing and cure. *Hikari To Kaze To Yume (Light, Wind, and Dream)* published, shortlisted for Akutagawa Literary Award. Died of asthma.

Major Works

Sangetsuki: February, 1942

Meijinden: December, 1942

Deshi: February, 1943

Riryo: July, 1943

Complete Works of Atsushi Nakajima: 1944

Notes

Kantan of Cho: capital city of Cho, one of the seven great provinces in the Sengoku Era (403 B.C. to 221 B.C.) in China, now in Hebei district; was capital from 386 B.C. to 222 B.C.

Kanko of Sai: ruler of Sai province from 685 B.C. to 643 B.C.

The First Emperor of the Tsin Dynasty: Shi Huangdi who unified China for the first time and reigned from 259 B.C. to 210 B.C.

Taigyo: Four-hundred-kilometer long mountain range bordering Hebei and Shanxi districts.

Kakuzan: Dominant peak of Taigyo mountain range.

Gei: Legendary archery master of ancient Chinese tale in which ten suns appear during reign of one Emperor Ko, causing agonizing heat. Gei shoots down nine suns with bow and arrow.

Yohyuki: Archery master in the Chunqiu era (770 B.C. to 453 B.C.). Out of a hundred shots at a hundred paces was said capable of hitting a willow-leaf target a hundred times.

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